

Q: Good afternoon. Today is Thursday, October 6, 2016 and my name is Clara Silverstein with Historic Newton. I'm here at Newton City Hall in the Law Library with Elyse Katz. She'll be speaking to us today about her experiences as the wife of Robert Sandor Katz. He was a US Air Corps Staff Sergeant, and he served from 1942 to 1946. He unfortunately is no longer with us, but Elyse Katz will be telling us more about her experiences. Together we're participating in the Newton Oral History, Newton Talks Oral History Project that's being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center.

So I'd like to start by asking you: what's your connection to Newton?

A: My connection is that he was my husband.

Q: Okay. And how long did you live in Newton?

A: We moved to Newton in July of 1960.

Q: Okay. And you said you had some memorable experiences to tell us about as -- as his wife during the time of service.

A: I think that one of the things that starts to kind of describe him as a person was that he had a very strong sense of just what he was supposed to be and that whatever happened was right. He had a great deal of faith. And the story that I would relate later, where his life was saved because he wasn't in the spot he ordinarily would have been in, because he danced with me all night and ended up in the hospital. And the gentleman, the soldier that ended up alphabetically in his spot was killed, which is a horrible thing. And you know, why wasn't he there? I met him, we danced all night, and he went to the hospital instead of the graveyard.

Q: So when you two met was he already serving?

A: He was already serving. And my father was a Major in the Army Air Force and I was what we called an army brat, and a Brookline girl of 17 or 16, whatever. In Texas, I went to high school in Texas, Texas guys were not my thing. And I was looking for a Jewish boy! Being

Jewish, and I used to go--they had one Jewish meeting place in a 60-mile stretch of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and a half a dozen Jewish families. My parents never went to temple, and I would hitch a ride with one of the families to meet Jewish soldiers. And being the Major's daughter, nobody got near touching distance.

Q: So tell us about the dance.

A: So we were formally introduced. I knew most of the young men there and they all knew I was from Boston, and one night when I walked in, I didn't go regularly, I went when I could get a ride, and the Jewish soldiers went when they had time off. And I walked and one of the fellows that I knew dragged somebody over and said "Boston, meet Boston!" And that was our formal introduction. And after Boston met Boston, Boston 1 said to Boston 2, "Would you like to go out for dinner?" And I said, "Sure!" And so, after dinner the USO--the following week the USO came and had live entertainment at the air base. And I don't remember whether it was every week or twice a month, but anyway we went to the USO show where we danced all night. And he had brand-new shoes, which he never complained, ever, at any time that he was in excruciating pain, with blisters on his heels. And they were bad enough they put him in hospital the next day.

Q: So, and how soon did you become engaged after you met?

A: Well that was--we met when I was 16 years old. I hit my 17th birthday, I left Texas because my father was supposed to be transferred, and he went to the South Pacific. So this was August of 1940, let's see, boy, '44, and I didn't see him again until January of '46.

Q: So how did you stay in touch?

A: Letter writing daily. And just, as I said, he was not the only fellow that I wrote to at the time, because in that generation and at that time we wrote to a lot of servicemen. But our correspondence got a little more serious.

Q: And then and after he came back how soon did you get married?

A: He came back in January, and we knew we were going to get married at that point but we didn't tell anybody because my parents were in Detroit. This is, you understand, this is World War II, and everybody was disrupted. And we were living, I was living with an aunt, my sister with my grandmother, my parents were looking for housing, we were all over the country. So I figured my parents didn't even know he was home, I couldn't very well say I wanted to get married. So I kind of waited and I said when I wrote my parents--we didn't even make phone calls in those days, it would cost you like ten dollars to talk for two minutes, so everything was by correspondence. Seems hard to think about today when you get there and do email, but the phone was very special and very expensive and it was strictly letter writing. And I kind of wrote my parents and said, "Bob came home from the Pacific!" And maybe a couple of weeks later I see Bob off. Anyway by March we formally announced our engagement, we were married in August.

Q: So when he was writing to you, what did you learn about the war? Did he talk about what was going on?

A: Well he wrote about it daily. And one of the things that he had written in one of the letters which reflects back to this time when he wasn't killed by the accident with a machine gun, is that, he says, "Though I am daily in the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil." I mean that's quite a concept for 19 year old, 20 year old.

Q: So he would describe where he was, what he was doing?

A: He was pretty--the letters that I have from his command, he was pretty much shooting and flying B-24, B-27 bombers. He was a gunner. They had what they called the Martin turret, which hung off like a bubble on the bottom of the plane. And he was not a big person and he fit in this turret, so he had a bird's-eye view of what was down there. And he didn't know that he was colorblind, or it never came up, and he couldn't figure out why nobody else saw the Japanese guns. And when they came back, because he had the best view of anybody, being able to look, and when the planes returned, those that returned and weren't shot down and he said "There

were--did anybody see where the Japanese had their armament?" And everybody said "No!" And my husband said "Yes, of course!" And so nobody believed him and he said, "Just give me a map, draw it out, and we'll send a spotter plane tomorrow." And once they discovered yes--I don't know if people knew about color blindness, well I suppose they knew something, but they didn't realize how it would affect spotters. And since they never really allowed color blind people to be in the Air Force...

Q: So it gave him an advantage, he could see things that other people couldn't?

A: That he could see, because he couldn't see, he's green-brown-red color blind, he couldn't see the camouflage. So he saw the guns and whatever. And so that he was, their plane, and they went through all the battles. I have a list of all the battles he went through. And this was the 5th Air Force, the Pacific Ocean, saw all, two years of fighting over all those islands. And his squadron never lost a plane, which was incredible, with all of the amount that they lost. So, that was another--he feared no evil!

Q: There's another memorable thing you wanted to talk about regarding not being killed by the machine gun--you mentioned that, could you tell us more?

A: Right, well I think this first incident of not being killed by this guy that made a mistake with his 50-caliber machine gun, and I mean you see these train wrecks and you see planes and always people say, "I should have been on that plane, and I got saved." And it was kind of that, "Okay, I got saved, I didn't get killed, I must be destined to live." And that was sort of like his feeling through the whole war--that if he didn't die then, that he wasn't destined to die in this conflict. I mean that's the only thing I can say because he never--I mean he said "I fear no evil."

Q: You talked about the feeling of *bashert*, do you want to tell us more about that?

A: *Bashert* is in Jewish language just something that happens for some destiny reason. Nobody knows why or you don't have--it isn't saying that everything in your life is destined, but the fact that you weren't at that place at that time when somebody died, was, that it was *bashert*, it was

meant that you were to live. So that's just kind of...and I guess most Jewish kids or families grow up with this term because it has happened to all of us. At some point you were or were not at some place that would have been good or bad.

Q: What kind of support did you get from people that you had in your community? Did they know you were writing to a soldier and that you...

A: Well see there was no community. As I said, I lived, I went to high school in Harlingen, Texas, which was a town of 6,000 white people and 12,000 soldiers and probably 4,000 of other kind. And we were right on the Mexican border, we walked to Mexico like you would walk from Newton over to Watertown. It was closer--the side of Newton touching Watertown. I mean it was just...and Texas, as they said in 1942 and still is, it was another country. It's a foreign country. And I don't think many Texans except those that have maybe moved there from the North or the East have changed. It was just a whole totally different culture. I mean everybody had a gun, you went out and shot, and in those days most of the people, they didn't shoot for fun, they shot for food. It was a big business to have the animals brought to these places where they cleaned them and packaged them and froze them.

Q: Do you recall the day that he came home, that his service ended?

A: No. Funny, I really don't.

Q: And do you feel like his experiences affected you? His experiences in the war, how did they affect you later?

A: I think just kind of going along with many things in our lives, where things just happened. And generally *bashert* is happening for the good. And so that, you know, I don't know, just the fact that, anything we certainly lived a happy, wonderful marriage. And we became boaters, and even with our boats they kind of fell in our lap, so somebody called and said so and so I know wants to sell their boat. You know with many of the things that had happened to our lives just sort of happened. It wasn't anything we'd been looking at. Even when we bought a house in

Newton, we'd been living in Wellesley and we were sort of looking in Wellesley although I really wanted to come to Newton. And a friend of mine said, "You know there's a builder around the corner building some houses." So we looked and we said, "Yeah we like that, okay."

Q: Did he talk about the war after he returned, or...?

A: No. No. It was one once he was home, that was it. Because he'd been talking about it to me for over two years. I had lived in many places with many people, as I said the family was very disrupted with my father in the service. And once the war was over, particularly the officers, I don't know about anybody else, he went, my father went in from Boston, he had to come out from Boston. So all of a sudden, here he got his papers, "Okay, you're no longer in the Army. Come to Boston in September of 1945." Well at that point nobody had apartments, there were thousands and thousands of soldiers, there was no place to live, no jobs, no anything. And here you are.

Q: So what did you do to find your first apartment?

A: Well we lived with my in-laws for six months, and then we contacted a real estate agent, it's a funny story. In those years rent was frozen, and we finally found an apartment on Commonwealth Avenue in Brighton, and it was \$50 a month, rent frozen, a six-room apartment. However, we had to pay a \$600 bonus to get this, which is even more than, about an extra year's rent. And so we were there four years and at that point rents of course were going sky high, and they were dividing up all these apartments. And the landlord had called us and we refused to pay any more money than our 50 bucks. I said that was our deal, we paid you 600 bucks, and then \$50 a year. So he said, "How long you going to be there?" And I said, "Maybe forever?" So I finally called him one day, we had seen a house in Wellesley, and I said, "You know we saw house and we're thinking about moving, but we had to buy the stove and the refrigerator to live here, and the blinds, and this and that, and if we had that money back from you we could afford the down payment on the house." So this big Boston realtor, you know one of these slum landlords, came dashing over, handed us the money, and said, "When are you moving?"

Q: Did you know other families of veterans where the husband had served? Was that your social circle or not so much?

A: Well most of the people that we met were already new friends. So that we met, my husband went back to school, he was going to BU. So they were...and the fraternity house became kind of the home, the living room for all the returning vets, because nobody had a place to live, everybody was living with her parents or his parents. So that was -- was kind of the social life. Now as I said most of the guys came back and had to finish school. They all left school. And so, and this was, well because it was depression before World War Two. And at this point when they all came home of course the Depression was beginning to boom because all these guys came and started new families and all of a sudden everybody's got money, and that they're buying. So that's...

Q: Is there anything that you'd like people to know 100 years from now, or anything you think your husband would like people to know?

Q: Well, you know when you talk about 100 years from now, I think back even to 50 years ago when we were first married, or 70 years, I would be married 70 years, and life was much simpler. My kids walked to school, if they went out to play I didn't have to keep my eye on them every minute. And I think all of that which we've lost is really sad. And just in the "me first" kind of mentality which is today, which during war years was, that never was. I mean I'm sure it had some way or another but the philosophy of most of the people I knew was not "me first." And I think the fact that our country has lost a lot of that is very sad. And you know, and I was watching more of the automobile accidents with my son the other night, and I said, "I don't know, we never had these cars going into restaurants, going into houses." Whether the cars didn't go as fast or there wasn't as much liquor, I have no...I can't conceive of all of these really ridiculous accidents, and even some of the bicycles and motorcycle things. I mean I had people, even yesterday I'm driving on a road and of course there's a blind spot in the car. And a car, a bicycle came from behind me, went around behind me, and I'm signaling a left-hand turn. And I mean I could have hit him. And even when I was looking at the duck boat thing, a friend of ours

was active in the duck boats and I've driven one. So, you know and I watched it on TV, and here's somebody taking a right hand turn and they have to cut in front of the duck boat. I mean I don't, I can't understand this, "me first, I have to go there first." I think that's sad.

Q: Well it looks like our time is just about up. I wondered if there is one more thing you'd like to tell us that you haven't touched on yet.

Q: Well I had the incident about my husband not dying the time they were shot, and I guess...well those are the two main things I think that transformed our lives, that was meant to be, we were happy, we were meant to be happy, and anything that came up, "Yeah, why not?"

A: Alright, well thank you for taking this time to do this project with us. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History project.

Q: Well I thank you for paying attention to me. If you're interested in...I don't know if you want any of these pictures...

A: I think they do at the library.

After formally finishing their interview, the participant shared another story which will follow without introduction here.

A: When the war in Europe was over, which was sometime I guess in June, VE day, we all knew that the war in Japan was going to be ending at some point. This is when they develop the atom bomb and the whole story that went with dropping the bomb. Before the first bomb was dropped, my husband's squadron was scheduled to bomb Nagasaki. I think Nagasaki was the first one. And they were told that if they got anywhere near Nagasaki, if they saw an unusual-looking cloud or smoke they should make a big detour around it. And they were given a second area to bomb. And they did indeed see the strange cloud, but at that time they had no idea because the atom bomb was really hush-hush, even to the gunners and the bombardiers until after it worked.